

Beaver Country Day School and the Advanced Placement Program FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Aren't Advanced Placement courses proof that a school's programs are academically strong?

The Advanced Placement program has great value as a tool that allows schools to establish curricula in particular courses that require students to perform to a specific, known standard—at least if those students are required to sit the Advanced Placement examination. For schools needing to establish themselves or for schools whose quality has long been demonstrated by the number of Advanced Placement courses offered, these courses are a boon and make an important contribution to the quality of American secondary education.

For schools of established reputation, or for schools seeking to set standards for student learning at a higher level than those of the College Board, Advanced Placement courses, built on an audited curriculum set by the Board (the audit is undertaken in order to protect the Advanced Placement trademark), may actually limit the scope of instruction and more importantly the standard for student performance (after all, a single morning's or afternoon's test score is the only measure of a student's actual performance against the "AP standard"). Many independent schools are now examining the Advanced Placement program in light of the audit process; some are making the decision to drop the "Advanced Placement" designation from courses altogether. Examples of well-respected independent schools that have dropped or are dropping the "AP" label from their courses are Fieldston in New York City, Westtown and Haverford in Pennsylvania, Providence Academy in Minnesota, Crossroads in Santa Monica, and Oldfields in Maryland. Phillips Exeter Academy and Boston University Academy, by the way, do not offer any courses with the "AP" label.

Even for schools that do not offer Advanced Placement-labeled courses, the ability to offer Advanced Placement examinations to interested students remains an important part of the program and an important way for the most ambitious students to demonstrate their learning. BCDS is committed to offering our students the opportunity to sit the Advanced Placement tests in whichever subject areas are of interest to them.

So, Advanced Placement courses are not always consistent with the mission and values of BCDS?

BCDS is, after all, a progressive independent school. Our commitment to progressive education has always been to the development of unique and challenging intellectual experiences that stretch our students' capacities in many ways; the Advanced Placement program no longer serves that goal. As an independent school, BCDS has the opportunity and the obligation to explore the very best ways to educate our students.

It is also worth pointing out that an ongoing issue in the national Advanced Placement discussion has to do with who has access to these courses. Many schools that boast of offering many AP courses actually do so only to a small percentage of their best students. It is a part of the mission of this school

to do all that we can to make sure that all of our students are well prepared for and have access to our most exciting and challenging upper-level courses.

Will our students be penalized in the college admission process because they don't have "AP" courses on their records?

As Gail Berson, dean of admission at Wheaton College, told our juniors and their families at a college planning event in the winter of 2006, colleges judge students on the strength of the programs they have taken relative to the rigor of programs offered at the school. In other words, students at a school that does not offer Advanced Placement-labeled courses will not be penalized for not having AP courses on their transcripts. Each school—BCDS is no exception—provides colleges with a detailed school profile that accompanies each application; the BCDS profile clearly describes the nature of our programs and clearly communicates which are our most demanding courses in each discipline. Since BCDS has in recent years been increasing the quality and challenge level of upper-level course offerings in all disciplines, it is the ongoing task of the college counseling office, in concert with the academic administration, to expand our efforts to communicate to colleges and universities (and of course to our own enrolled and prospective families) the unique features of our program and the nature of all our upper-level, honors, and advanced course offerings. Schools (including BCDS) that have dropped the AP designation from their courses have had their decisions received enthusiastically by colleges—even the most selective—as a step toward differentiating their students and their programs in a competitive world in which such differentiation can be a positive factor in gaining college admission.

What does BCDS gain by dropping the "AP" designation?

Among other things, dropping the Advanced Placement label from our highest-level courses gives our school the chance to be itself—to focus on fulfilling a mission directed not at the mere mastery of course material but rather at supporting our students as they develop into intellectual and moral beings. The differentiating factor of having made an affirmative decision to develop our own most challenging courses speaks to our belief in our mission, in our students, and above all in the power of our faculty to create learning experiences for students that elicit a high degree of intellectual engagement and that involve active, authentic work toward gaining the deepest possible understanding of challenging concepts, difficult skills, and sophisticated content.

BCDS also gains the opportunity to take a certain position on the moral high ground of the whole standardized testing and standardized curriculum issue. As events such as the 2006 SAT score-error debacle have shown, even the most diligent of the high-stakes testing entities—and in this case the entity that happens to control the Advanced Placement program—is capable of errors that can affect the lives of children.

But BCDS will continue to offer Advanced Placement examinations?

As noted above, BCDS continues to offer Advanced Placement examinations, and we are constantly

exploring ways of expanding the support we can give students who wish to sit these examinations. We know that it is in our students' interest to provide such support wherever we can.

In addition, all departments are looking more closely at the content of their courses relative to the demands of the standardized testing that is an inevitable part of our students' experience. Whether it is in increasing the amount of formal instruction students receive in grammar and usage as they pertain to writing, practicing the kinds of writing that are assessed on the new SAT (I) Reasoning Test, or seeking better ways to guide students in their preparation for the SAT (II) Subject Tests, we will continue to do what we must to support our students.

It is also worth pointing out that Advanced Placement examination scores, and not the presence of AP courses on a transcript, determine what, if any, academic benefit a newly admitted college student will receive from participating in the Advanced Placement program. As has been reported in the news media of late, an increasing number of colleges are decreasing the benefit level available to students based on AP test scores, thereby significantly decreasing the "advanced placement" one might receive from scoring well.

But hasn't BCDS always offered Advanced Placement courses? Why move away from them?

BCDS first began offering Advanced Placement-labeled courses in the mid 1980s as part of a comprehensive overhaul of the school's academic programs in the name of ensuring the degree of quality of a BCDS education. At that time, the addition of honors courses, an increase in graduation requirements (now among the most rigorous of any local independent school), and the establishment of externally driven AP-designated courses was seen as a way for BCDS to manifest the seriousness of its academic purpose.

More than twenty years later, BCDS needs no external justification or seal of approval (other than its continuing accreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges) for its programs or its standards. As a school we are known for an outstanding faculty, clear standards—both in specific academic programs and the Core Standards that guide the development of all aspects of the BCDS experience—and the solid record of our students in all areas of endeavor, including college admission.

What do BCDS our students gain?

Along with the important factor of being at a school whose programs are positively differentiated from those of others, BCDS students gain some extraordinary academic opportunities. Specifically, instead of the old "AP" courses in the sciences and mathematics, students have the opportunity to elect Honors Advanced courses in these disciplines. The courses are intensive courses in such areas as Calculus, Organic Chemistry, and various advanced topics in physics and biology, including topics that can draw directly on BCDS's unique biotechnology facilities. When colleges hear about these courses, they are excited and intrigued, for few students nationwide have the opportunity to take such courses in high school.

Members of the BCDS faculty are subject-matter specialists, and few schools in the world match the comprehensive training our teachers receive in the art of designing curriculum and assessments. Both

our capacity and our reputation for excellence in these areas ensure that all of courses, from middle school staples to Honors Advanced electives, are exceptionally strong in both content and pedagogical soundness.

In the past several years BCDS has been developing a much stronger and more varied program of challenging upper-level coursework in all areas: the History and English honors programs, the advanced courses in modern language, and the honors portfolio programs under discussion in the Visual and Performing Arts departments are just some examples. It is only natural that in the course of this work faculty members in all departments, including Mathematics and Science, have seized the opportunity to imagine and then create courses to challenge and engage our best students in a way that is consonant with our mission and values as well as with their highest and most rigorous aspirations for their students.

School is, after all, for the students, and the thoughtful process by which BCDS has moved toward the establishment of our own advanced curriculum in all subject areas has ensured that our students are being well served both in the kinds of academic program they experience at BCDS and in the ways in which they and their experiences are perceived by college admission offices. We continue in our efforts to make the BCDS a standout for both its actual quality and its reputation.

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